

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN RECENT COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Communalism is one of the most important issues in recent Indian politics. There is a broad historical background of communalism in India. However, the forms and the character of Indian communalism have changed drastically in recent times. These discussions specially focus on the multi-dimensional role of social media in the recent communal violence in India. Assam violence (2012), Muzaffarnagar riots (2013) and Baduria riots (2017) are taken as case studies for a broader interpretation of the topic. At present, social media has become one of the important parts of a person's daily life as a medium for communication and entertainment. Social media has both positive and negative impacts. As individual and society are intimately connected with each other, social media has negative effects on the individual's personal life as well as social life. Its consequences are very catastrophic. In India, a large number of citizens actively use the internet and social media on daily basis. As a result, social media is being used as a tool to control the individual as well as the society. So here, an attempt has been made to understand how social media is slowly trying to establish a psychological hegemony over the individual on communal line; how it creates a practical organized image and how it has turned into a strong tool of political propaganda.

Keywords: - Communal Violence, Social Media, Assam Violence 2012, Muzaffarnagar Riots 2013, Baduria Riots 2017.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is no universally accepted definition or concept of communalism but it is quite controversial. So without entering into complex theoretical analysis, it can be argued that communalism in general is a conflict or an activity related to violence between two or more different religious or ethnic groups. The problem exists in almost all societies of the present world. Especially in South Asian countries the problem of communalism is extremely chronic. As one of the South Asian countries, India is also affected by the same problem.

India is truly a diverse country. Indian civilization is quite ancient and it is enriched by more than a thousand distinct cultures that originated from different religions, castes, tribes and ethnic groups. Different religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism originated and spread in Indian soil. Later, people of many other religions like Islam, Christianity and other ethno-religious groups have lived long in this country along with their independent culture. Thus, India has become a country of many religions, languages, castes, and creeds. As a result, Indians have been practicing long a pluralistic lifestyle, especially in their social and cultural fields. This multicultural character of Indian society and politics is constitutionally recognized. At various times, due to different historical, socio-economic, cultural and political changes, the tolerance of Indian society has begun to break. There is a long historical context behind it, whose detailed discussion is not so relevant in this topic. It can be argued that communal politics originated strongly in India during the period of colonial rule. On August 15, 1947, India gained independence from British rule nearly after two hundred years. This independence was secured on the grounds of communal partition. This led to the birth of two separate and independent nations, namely, India and Pakistan. Since then, the context of communalism has taken a new dimension in Indian society and politics, and at present, it has taken an extremely serious form.

With the advent of 'Internet Era' around the world in the 21st century, people's lives have changed drastically. In this 'Era of Digitalization', trends in various fields of socio-economic, cultural, political has changed all over the world. Even the nature and the character of modern state-politics and administrative systems have undergone many changes. This can be seen in the context of 'Globalization'. One of the means of this globalization process

is 'Media'. Generally, the meaning of media refers to different ways of communication. This media turns into a 'Mass media' when it reaches a larger section of audience. Newspapers, Radio, Television, Magazines etc. are some of the examples of mass media. Mass media can also be distinguished into many categories such as print media, broadcast media, social media etc. In this discussion, the role of 'Social Media' has been given prior focus. Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter and various social networking assets are the examples of social media that can be used with the help of internet-friendly smart phones, desktop, laptop and similar electronics gadgets.

The internet usage history in India is not very old. The use of the internet for the first time was launched by the state-owned company VSNL (Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited) on 15th of August, 1995. Earlier, the use of the internet was restricted to various government agencies. But it was the first time the internet system was opened for everyone for its use. According to the available statistics till December 31st, 2018, more than 1.3 billion people are living in India. At present, about 40 percent of the Indian population actively uses the internet. India's global position ranks second in terms of internet users. According to the WEF (World Economic Forum) the number of internet users in India will reach 1.1 billion by the end of 2030. Also in terms of internet users, it can be argued that India has one of the biggest markets of mobile and smart phones. Most of the internet users of India are young generation and they are particularly interested in using social networking apps and websites. According to statistics obtained by January 2019, the number of active users of social media in India is about 310 million, which is expected to reach around 448 million by 2023.

A new phenomenon called, 'Cybercrime' has emerged in the world of crime due to its negative use. In general, 'Cybercrime' is a kind of unlawful activity that takes place by the means of internet. Before entering into the main discussion, the tendency of the cybercrime in India should be discussed. The trend of cybercrime in India is very new and it is constantly expanding. In the period between 2011 and 2014, the level of cybercrime in India has increased approximately by 300 percent. According to a report published by the NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau), the level of cybercrime in India has increased almost twice as much as in 2017. In order to reduce the trend of cybercrime, 'Information Technology Act' was formulated by the Government of India in 2000. In 2001, under the India-US mutual collaboration, a 'Cyber Security Forum' was founded. On this basis, it can be said that the tendency of India's recent communal violence has gradually become equivalent to 'Cyber-Jihad' or 'Cyber-Terrorism'. Although 'Communalism' and 'Terrorism' are both completely different things, despite that 'Barbarism' is one of the most striking features among the two. Various terrorist organizations are using the social network with the help of the internet in the field of terrorist activity around the world. The same picture is evident in India's recent communal violence.

In this context, the conflict between 'Individual Rights and National Integrity' has also become stronger in India. There has been a growing demand for regulatory measures on the public use of the internet and especially social media in India, to curb the rumours and to prevent such criminal activities. The present government of India has begun thinking about bringing regulatory action over the internet and social media. Its main purpose is to prevent the spread of rumours on social media. Even the proposal to link Aadhar Card numbers of every Indian citizen with social media has been suggested. But such a move has led to considerable controversy over the question of a person's right to personal information security. In addition to the regulatory demands, the struggle to promote the Freedom of Speech of the people is ongoing. According to the Section 66A of the Information Technology Act (2000), a person can be arrested if he/she makes an objectionable post online. In the case of *Shreya Singhal vs. Union of India* (2015), Supreme Court of India has struck down Section 66A of the IT Act as unconstitutional on grounds of violating the freedom of speech guaranteed under Article 19(1) (a) of the Constitution of India. Also, in India, government authorities have opted for internet shutdown to prevent such violent activities and spread of fake news. This, of course, has continued the debate.

Now it can be discussed how social media has influenced India's recent communal violence. In this case, social media does not just spread rumours but it has a multi-dimensional role. Moreover, social media should not be viewed solely as villain. Rather, the synthesis of all the catalysts that work along with it also need to be considered. Initially, social media plays its role on communal violence in three ways; viz. 'Pre-role', 'Intermediate role' and 'Post-role'. In the case of 'Pre-role', it was observed that the active presence of social media triggers communal violence. In the case of 'Intermediate role', social media plays an active role in the midst of communal tension, and it adds fuel to it. Lastly, in the case of 'Post-role', social media especially helps to increase the tension in the aftermath of a communal violence. Although social media, especially in a multi-faceted society like India, does not only play its role strictly according in these categories, but the dominance of any one of these three roles remains intact. Social media has played an active and significant role in various incidents that has taken place in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. The details of this topic are discussed below through an analysis of three important events.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Roy & Shukla (2016) ^[13] suggests that necessary administrative measures need to be taken to eliminate the negative impact that social media has on communal violence. At the same time, all the weaknesses of the current IT Act need to be overcome.

Pathak (2014) ^[14] states that social media was not single-handedly responsible for spreading the influence of Assam violence (2012) in different parts of India. Rather, different catalysts worked with it. Social media has also been used in a very negative way.

Kumar & Dayal (2018) ^[19] found that social media was widely used to spread rumours in the Muzaffarnagar riots (2013). Apart from this, social media was also used for creating division on communal line to gain political mileage.

Kumar & Dayal (2018) ^[23] showed that the main reason behind the launch of Baduria riots (2017) was the controversial Facebook post. They also showed in their study that social media worked as a fuel even in the midst of communal conflict.

3. ASSAM VIOLENCE OF 2012 [A 'POST-ROLE' OF SOCIAL MEDIA]

Assam violence (2012) is an outstanding example of how social media can play a multi-faceted role in the aftermath of a communal violence. In July 2012, violence in the Indian state of Assam broke out with riots between indigenous Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims. There is a broad historical context behind this communal conflict of Assam, whose detailed discussion is not so important. The violence in 2012 followed ethnic tensions between the indigenous Bodo people and illegal Bengali-speaking Muslim immigrant. While the Bengali-speaking Muslims state that they are descendants of East Bengali Muslims were brought to Assam during the British Raj. Local indigenous communities allege that the Muslim population has increased, boosted by refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan before the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 and by subsequent illegal migrants from Bangladesh. By the mid-1970s, increased competition for livelihood, land and political power led to frequent incidents of violence. Similarly, the incident of 2012 is one such example.

Ethnic tensions between Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims escalated into a riot in *Kokrajhar* (Assam) on 20 July 2012, when some unidentified miscreants killed four Bodo youths at *Joypur*. This was followed by retaliatory attacks on local Muslims by killing two and injuring several of them on the morning of 21st of July 2012. Almost 80 people were killed; most of them were Bengali Muslims and some Bodos. 400,000 people were displaced to migrant camps; most of them were Muslims by religion. In this violence social media played an important role. Many videos, pictures and news of this incident were circulated throughout social media. The print media and broadcasting media played a major role in spreading the news of the incident, but not in the way that social media worked in an organized manner. Therefore, there is a special need to focus on the multi-dimensional role of social media.

The effects of the violence of Assam were also seen in various parts of India like Pune, Mumbai, Bengaluru etc. There are many scattered tensions in such areas. How social media worked behind these events must be discussed now. On August 11, 2012, a protest meeting was held in Azad Maidan, Mumbai, to condemn the Assam incident. But suddenly some of the agitated people in the protest meeting were showcased some of the provocative photos of Assam violence. They started shouting slogans against the police and media, even attacking them. After a preliminary inquiry, the police revealed that the incident was completely 'pre-planned' and various social media platforms like Facebook; WhatsApp etc. were being used by them for planning and campaigning. This reflects how social media was used for mobilizing and organizing a mob.

It is necessary to mention a special incident that took place in Bengaluru on August 20, 2012. Various anonymous threat messages were widely circulated throughout Bengaluru using SMS service, including social media. The essence of all these threat messages was that the people from the North-East states, who were living in Bengaluru, would be attacked if they did not leave the city before Eid al-Fitr. This led to enough panic and many people from the North-East India returned to their respective states. The process of spreading the panic was mainly done by using SMS services and various social media platforms. To counter this panic, Union Home Ministry banned bulk SMS and MMS for fifteen days and increased surveillance over social media activities. Thus, this 'attack of rumours' created by social media forced thousands of people belonging to North-Eastern

states to leave Bengaluru. Discussion had come up about cybercrime and internet shutdowns in this regard (Pathak, 2014).

After the overall tragedy of these incidents, it can be said that social media is truly playing a multi-dimensional role. In this case, social media is not only about spreading rumours, but rumours have found a real basis or platform through which they can work. This is how an 'organized picture of rumours' is created. In most of the cases, these are politically affiliated. Moreover, social media is also being used negatively to mobilize a section of the public.

4. MUZAFFARNAGAR RIOTS OF 2013 [AN 'INTERMEDIATE ROLE' OF SOCIAL MEDIA]

Muzaffarnagar riot is a prime example of how social media can play an active role during a communal tension. These communal clashes took place between the Hindu and Muslim communities in Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh, India in August-September 2013. The riot has been described as 'the worst violence in Uttar Pradesh in recent history'. Clashes between two communities, Hindu Jats and Muslims, in *Shamli* and Muzaffarnagar grew on 27th of August 2013. The original cause of the riots is still disputed. In this case, the cause of the rioting alternates between a traffic accident and an eve-teasing incident. However, the conflict between the two parties took religious colour and it turned into riots. These riots resulted into 62 deaths including 42 Muslims and 20 Hindus and injured 93 and left more than 50,000 displaced. The exact numbers have been a subject of much debate.

The role of social media in the context of the aforementioned subject must be discussed now. Social media was widely abused as a tool to spread rumours. Many fake videos, pictures and news were circulated throughout social media. Political propaganda also worked behind it. A political leader was arrested for promoting fake videos on social media. This video showed that a Muslim mob had brutally murdered two Hindu youths, which was not a part of the Muzaffarnagar riots but was an old video of an incident in *Sialkot*, Pakistan. Religious tensions spread even more as a result of these issues, and the question became more puzzling as how exactly the impact of social media on communal violence could be prevented. Akhilesh Yadav, the then Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, blamed the negative use of social media for the spread of Muzaffarnagar riots. He also said that social media was responsible for the disruption of the law and order and to prevent that, censorship measures needed to be introduced. It can be explained in another way that there is a tendency to blame social media for the administrative failures. In the wake of the Muzaffarnagar incident, the then Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, addressed the issue of social media abuse at the 'National Integration Council' meeting on September 23rd of 2013. He said that the anti-national power should not be used to abuse social media, so it was important to take a careful look on that matter.

The whole event can be evaluated by several important findings. The main question that becomes the basis of the whole incident is whether we can directly identify social media as a villain? The idea that a person sitting at home watching, commenting or sharing rumours in media format is directly involved in rioting with the rioters, is quite irrational. So the question remains as, how reasonable it is to call social media a 'direct villain'. What really matters now is how and to what extent the social media has established a 'psychological hegemony' over a person on communal line. At present, a large section of the young generation uses social media. So it can be understood how important this 'psychological hegemony' is. The impact of this 'psychological hegemony' is a gradual process. Slowly it consumes the mind of a person. Also, the reluctance to verify the authenticity of a rumour works behind it. As a result, rumours become gossips but the context of verifying the information is neglected. In this way, the matter becomes very important for political culture and also for political socialization.

5. BADURIA RIOTS OF 2017 [A 'PRE-ROLE' OF SOCIAL MEDIA]

One of the examples of social media playing a role in the launch of communal violence is the Baduria Riot's in 2017. These incidents of religious conflict took place in the Baduria town in Basirhat subdivision of the North 24 Pargana district of West Bengal in India. Tensions started rising after a post in social media on Islamic prophet 'Muhammad' and 'Kaaba' by a 17-year-old student. The images were seen as objectionable and went viral in entire Baduria town. A section of angry Muslim mobs vandalized the houses and shops of Hindu community people. In response, some Hindus also demolished the Muslim Dargahs, houses and their shops. Thus, the conflict between the Hindus and Muslims spread throughout the Basirhat region. It was claimed that

this violence was an outcome of local outrage of some Muslim extremists. But according to some news sources and local media reports, the villagers of Baduria, Basirhat and of its neighborhood claimed the rioters were outsiders.

Social media was one of the most important factors in all these incidents. The controversial Facebook post went viral on various social networking sites as well. Also, various pictures and videos of these communal clashes were circulated throughout the social media. Many of them were fake news. A well-known scene of a Bhojpur movie, '*Aurat Khilona Nahi*', went viral on social media claiming to be a part of the Baduria conflict. Police arrested a number of individuals as well as some political leaders for allegedly circulating the fake news on social media platform. Some of them were involved in spreading rumours with the help of multiple social media accounts. It is clear that the incident in Baduria did not happen in a completely spontaneous manner, but rather an organizational force worked there. Social media has been used as one of the weapons to promote communal hatred. During this time a large part of social media usage shared religiously provocative posts (Kumar & Dayal, 2018). A fact-finding report made by CSSS (Centre for Study of Society and Secularism) showed that communal conflict of Baduria was not only an impulsive issue but had a political motive behind it.

To understand this given point more clearly, some more disturbing events of that time must be discussed. Shortly before the Baduria incident, religious tension was triggered by an abusive social media post of a youth living in an area of Birbhum (West Bengal). Again, on June 14th of that year, an offensive social media post by a school teacher living in *Harishchandrapur* area of Malda district triggered communal tension. These entire things became quite eye-catching. In view of these growing incidents, the honorable chief minister of West Bengal, Smt. Mamata Banerjee declared in a media conference that 'it has become a design to use the social media platform to foment trouble and create instability in the state.' As she searched for solutions, a proposal was mooted to set up as many as 60,000 booth level 'peace committees' on a permanent basis to deal with such incidents. She also suggested that these committees should have members from all religious communities – this would be West Bengal government's Quick Response Team (QRT) for the future, it was suggested. The government had also set up a cyber-surveillance team to put a check on such activities. This means that new administrative measures are needed to prevent social media from having a serious impact on communal violence.

6. CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above discussions that social media plays a multi-dimensional role in recent communal violence in India. The role of social media has already been discussed here by dividing it into three main categories, namely, "Pre-role", "Intermediate role" and "Post-role". But in ever-changing society where the character of communalism has also changed, it is not possible to maintain this categorization strictly. That's why social media plays a multi-dimensional role by positioning itself in one of the three main categories. Creating rumour attacks, mobilizing people on communal line, organizing mobs, promoting political agendas etc. are some examples of multi-dimensional role played by social media. In this way, social media has become an organized or constructive tool. Communalism broke out of its traditional form and gave birth to new dimensions. New administrative components are required to prevent it. Traditionally, the publicity and spread of communalism was largely dependent on communal organizations and texts. But especially in the twenty-first century, the magnitude and spread of communalism has increased, due to social media as one of the factors. Communalism takes departure from its 'traditional hegemonic style' to 'psychological hegemonic style'. Above all, it can be said that a 'digital form of communalism' has emerged which requires a deeper exploration.

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